Hospital car parking – A charge too far

Introduction
Exorbitant hospital parking charges are unacceptable but have increasingly become the norm in England because the NHS is so starved of funds.

More often than not the running of hospital car parks has been taken over by private companies, which have introduced sky-high charges that bring them huge profits.

Steep hospital parking charges unfairly hit patients, their relatives and staff. Many NHS staff, including porters and nurses, work shifts and live far away from the hospitals where they're employed so can't easily use public transport. In effect, parking charges are an extra tax on wages. In addition the limited availability of spaces can mean a stressful start to the day or their shift as staff drive around endlessly trying to find somewhere to park.

The government must intervene and put an end to these crippling parking charges, and give the NHS the resources it needs so that trusts are not forced to try and squeeze extra revenue from patients and staff.

Previous research
UNISON first investigated car parking charges in April 2017 through a Freedom of Information request sent to all NHS trusts in England, Scotland and Wales.

The data showed that some hospitals were charging NHS staff, including low-waged cleaners and those in catering, fees of almost £100 a month to park. The report highlighted a postcode lottery, with a wide variation in charging policies around the country.

The Press Association (PA) conducted a similar exercise in December 2017, with findings that mirrored UNISON's. PA's research showed that in 2016/17 alone, English NHS trusts made £175m from parking fees. But UNISON believes all NHS staff should be able to park for free at or near their place of work.

About the survey
An online survey was sent out to health workers represented by UNISON in July 2018. A total of 3,561 completed it. Almost all (97%) worked for the NHS. More than 85% were based in a hospital and 11% out in the community.

There was a wide representation of NHS roles:

- 42% were nurses
- 25% of the participants were clinical support staff, including healthcare assistants, nursing associates, and maternity support staff
- 8% were allied professionals, including operating department practitioners and occupational therapists
- 8% administrative staff such as receptionists, clerks and secretaries
- 7% healthcare students and apprentices.

Just over a quarter of the respondents (26%) were low-paid workers within band 2 (paid between £17,000 and £18,000), 24% were band 5 (£23,000-£29,000) and 17% were band 6 (earning between £28,000 and £36,000).

Findings

Reasons to drive to work
A third (33%) said public transport was not an option because of the nature and time of their shifts. An additional 33% said there was no convenient public transport option available. More than one in ten (13%) said they needed to take their cars to work because their job required them either to drive to patients' houses, or to transport resources within the community.

Some staff responding to the survey said they needed to take a car to work because they had to combine their journey to work to drop children off at school or nursery, or to call in on elderly relatives. Others cited the distance between work and home (up to 50 miles in some cases), not feeling safe using public transport, or because they had a disability.

The cost of parking
Three in five (63%) health workers are charged for a monthly or an annual parking permit, with the majority (48%) paying between £20 and £39 a month. A minority (1.3%) have to find more than £100 per month so they can park at work.

Hardly any health staff (fewer than one in ten) that pay for parking permits have access to guaranteed parking spaces. And some (6%) of those without a permit spend up to £100 a month using car parks run by organisations other than the trusts they work for.

More than half the staff responding (58%) said the cost of parking had increased in their workplace since January 2016.

Difficulties parking
Fewer than one in ten (8%) had a guaranteed parking space. One in five (21%) spent up to 30 minutes a day looking for somewhere to park, with three in ten (30%) saying they tend to find a space straightaway.

In extreme cases (2.4%) the search can take up to an hour. More than half (55%) have been late for work because of difficulties in finding a space to park. This can cause unnecessary stress for staff at the start of their working day and could also have a negative impact on staff handovers and patient care.

When asked about difficulties to park health workers said:

"I was an hour late on a particular shift, despite getting in to the hospital grounds 30 minutes before my shift. I parking where I could and ended up with a parking fine for £60."

"When I start work at 11am, I can sometimes spend 45 minutes trying to find a space."

"On several occasions I have had to ring the ward to say I cannot find anywhere to park. I even leave my house over an hour before I need to get parked, but I have still been late due to a lack of spaces."

Fines and off-site parking
The survey shows that two-thirds (64%) of health workers have been fined when trying to park at work, and a similar number (63%) have had no option but to seek alternative parking elsewhere. A third (33%) have to pay to park away from their workplace.

Nurses, midwives and other health employees can be issued fines that cost more than a day's wage, meanwhile trusts and private contractors are making money from parking penalties.

When asked about being fined as a result of parking for a shift at work, employees said:

"I was fined £140 for not displaying my parking permit. It was clearly visible on the passenger seat but because I was in a rush I forgot to place it on the dashboard."

"I had to pay £135 and my car was towed away. I was on a 12.5 hour shift, and hadn't realised when I parked it was illegally. It was a dark winter morning and the street was badly lit. I thought my car had been stolen. The whole experience was very distressing, and as a student midwife the charge put me into debt for the month."

"I've had several car parking fines at £30 each. I have to park on street and add to a meter every 2.5 hours – but sometimes I cannot leave a patient to do this."

Four nations situation
The majority of NHS trusts in England and Northern Ireland charge staff to use hospital car parks.

Most hospital car parks in Scotland are free as fees were scrapped in 2009, but a number of sites still charge for privately-run car parks.

Parking is free in all Welsh hospital car parks for both staff and the public.

Last month shadow health secretary Jon Ashworth made a commitment to scrap extortionate parking charges, put money back in health workers' pockets and stop private contractors raking in the cash, a move that was welcomed by UNISON.

Conclusion
UNISON has been highlighting the exorbitant car parking charges imposed on staff for years and more recently has been campaigning for their abolition.

Even though many workers pay for an annual parking pass, this doesn't guarantee them a parking space. Our survey shows fewer than one in ten get a guaranteed space. If all the staff spaces are taken, they have to find, and might have to pay for a space in other car parks offsite, or have to keep running out to their cars to feed meters several times during their shift.

UNISON believes that healthcare staff should not have to pay to park during their working day. Where possible they should be able to park within hospital grounds so they can easily walk to their wards or departments. That's why UNISON is working with all NHS trusts in England and Northern Ireland to put plans in place to make parking free to all staff by 2020.

UNISON parking charter
Earlier this year, the union launched a parking charter. åThis is a tool for UNISON reps to start negotiations with employers and work towards abolishing car parking charges for NHS staff.

While parking is a source of revenue for cash-strapped trusts, the union believes neither they nor private parking firms should be making money from the people who make the NHS the world-class service it is, or from patients, and their friends and relatives.

Instead the government should be properly funding the NHS so employers in England and Northern Ireland don't have to rely on staff and patients as a source of revenue.

UNISON knows that abolishing charges can't happen overnight, but it wants trusts to take practical steps to reduce the financial burden of parking costs on staff as they make plans to scrap charges.

UNISON believes trusts should commit to scrapping parking charges for staff within two years. Trusts should also:

- guarantee a parking space for all staff with a valid parking permit and only charge employees for the hours their vehicles are parked at the hospital;
- act now to give all staff with a disability free on-site parking;
- provide emergency bays for on-call staff so they can park for free, and
- immediately make on-site parking free for all staff working night shifts.

While planning to abolish charges UNISON wants NHS trusts to:

- Ensure that the cost of parking is affordable, and charges are consistent across all sites, by charging staff on sliding scale so those earning less don't pay as much.
- Recognise the needs of staff whose choice about using their car is limited by the nature of their job or the availability of public transport, and give those staff free parking.

- In the short-term use the profits from staff parking charges to improve the safety and security of car parks.
- Develop sustainable transport schemes like staff buses, pool cars for community staff, park and ride schemes and incentives for bicycle use and car sharing schemes.

The details about UNISON's car parking charter are on the union's website.